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Sheri Bernstein

Bethany Silver was home for summer break and felt like a horse trapped in a hamster's cage. Everything about the Silvers' split-level house had morphed into miniature during Bethany's freshman year away: the ceilings, the hallways, the doors—all familiar yet more tangible, more fragile than she remembered. Even the blushing azaleas on their front lawn looked more like a stamp on a post-card of green than the towering hedges of color she'd left behind.

"You want to brush her hair?" ten-year-old Rachel had asked and held a ball-gown sheathed Barbie to Bethany's face.

Bethany wanted to be back at school where it was more than okay to eat ice-cream and order a pizza at midnight, where words like "curfew" and "Judaism" didn't matter, where a boy named Ivan Hamrick said sweet things to her.

Brushing Barbie's hair was the last thing Bethany Silver wanted to do, but begrudgingly, she did.

"Hey! Be gentle! She's got a big date tonight." Rachel theatrically nodded as if the information were top secret.

"Well, isn't she the lucky *shiksa*." Bethany handed the doll back to her sister and gave a weight-of-the-world sigh so common to girls on the rim of womanhood.

"What's that?" Rachel crinkled her nose.

"It's Yiddish for a woman who isn't Jewish," Dana Silver said and padded in from the kitchen. "But Barbie isn't a *shikse*. She's a nice Jewish girl, like you and you." Dana sat on the couch between her two daughters and ruffled their hair.

"What about Ken? Is he Jewish too?" Rachel asked.

Bethany took in her sister's eager eyes that looked at their mother as if she were Moses himself. *This is how the brainwashing begins*, she thought. In college, everyone was the same. There was no place on campus to use words like *shiksa* and *goy* without feeling socially retarded and derogatory. Only here, in narrow-minded suburbia, did kids like Rachel learn that Jews were different from everyone else, *special*. She wanted to be back in the free world of campus life where people shared ideas instead of preaching century-old rites and rituals that had long lost any value.

"Of course he is. He's a real *mensh*." Dana took the Ken doll and bowed it in Barbie's direction.

"Where do you come up with this stuff?" Bethany looked like she had sucked on a lemon.

"It's true. Barbie was invented by a Jewish woman. I saw the whole thing on Oprah." Dana nodded her head, and Rachel gave a breathless "wow."

"I'm sure the dolls she made were based on some beautiful WASPS, mom," Bethany said and stood up from the couch, from her mother's glow that bestowed Dana whenever she spoke of Jewish contributions.

"Actually, they were based on her children."

"G-d, you're like the Jewish Pride Parade." Bethany rolled her eyes and stormed off to her bedroom.

"Why thank you, Bethany," Dana replied to her retreating daughter.

More than anything, Bethany wanted to slam the door. But her home was too quiet a space for anger. Home was a place of fruit-bowls and doilies on old wooden tables, a place of toilet bowl covers and nightlights, a tiny world of mezuzahs on doorframes that seemed smaller each time Bethany turned around and looked for a way out. Home was a place where a mother like Dana Silver offered peace in exchange for biting words meant to incite. And this is perhaps why it was easier for Bethany to throw herself onto the Strawberry Shortcake bedspread and accept her long, provincially-lived fate of a summer.

"Danny's coming over?" Rachel asked their mother. Through the thin walls of the Silver home, Bethany could make out the kink of coils that bounced along with Rachel's excited jumps on the old couch.

Danny Stein: the only living creature capable of making Bethany Silver's home seem even smaller.

Dana Silver mashed at a smoking pot of cut potatoes with gusto. But if someone were to ask her what she was doing, she'd turn a fresh crimson and have to think before answering. Her hands were just working out a pins-and-needle fear that had everything to do with Bethany's return home.

"The table's all set. What else can I do?" Rachel asked as she skated around the kitchen floor in pink socks.

You could stay this age forever. You could remain the young girl who is eager to prepare a Shabbat dinner with her mother. That way I wouldn't have to look at my mistakes. That way I wouldn't have to believe in karma. Because my heart couldn't handle this kind of pain twice.

But of course, Dana could not speak these thoughts. Words from the gut rarely make it to the mouth. "You can peel the carrots if you'd like."

Rachel twisted her mouth like a balloon that slowly lets out air. "Okay," she sighed. "Mom....do you mind if I get ready instead?"

Dana saw nothing wrong with the lopsided ponytails that fell past her daughter's Minnie Mouse tee shirt. But Dana wasn't the one on the brink of adolescence.

“Of course not,” she said and focused on the rising challah dough.

“Mom, can I borrow your red nail polish?”

Dana laughed. It was a reflex meant to mask a cry.

“Fine, I’ll buy some of my own.” Rachel stormed off to her bedroom.

“It’s behind the mirror in our bathroom. Top shelf,” Dana called.

“Thanks, Mom.” Rachel ran back and hugged her mother before zipping back down the hall, before Dana had a chance to grab Rachel’s arms and never let go.

“Be careful not to spill any of it on—” The bathroom door gave a firm whoosh closed. There was no point continuing.

Dana began to peel the carrots herself. Now there were two daughters who no longer listened. And why should they? Had she listened to her own mother’s cries? No, she’d been more than happy to stay in civilized New York, far away from the rat-hole city of Odessa. Never mind that Russia was her mother’s home: a socialist country she clung to because it was all she ever knew, the place that held the memories of her own parents.

The backdrop of Dana Silver’s childhood was peppered with stories of Jewish anguish and suffering by her loving Aunt Sara. Aunt Sara, who bravely snuck a newborn Dana out of Odessa, away from the mother who was too steeped in grief and fear to protest.

But Dana didn’t want to listen. Young people tend to only possess sight in contrast: black or white, yes or no, good or evil. They are blind to a world of shades and layers. Dana’s young eyes saw no excuse for abandoning a child—plain and simple.

“You have to understand, *boobah*. Your mother, she lost everything to those Bastards,” Aunt Sara would explain.

The Bastards were the Nazis. And years later, *the Bastards* were the anti-Semites running the former USSR. Her mother finally caught her sister’s courage. But she’d been foolish enough to follow rules. She applied for a visa and was imprisoned with charges of insanity. *The Bastards* had left Dana a bastard child.

It was years later, when Dana Silver became pregnant for the first time, when her Aunt Sara’s love wasn’t enough, when Odessa was now Russia, and her mother lived in an assisted living facility, that she contacted her mother.

Dana was finally ready to listen to the woman she’d spent a lifetime trying to extract from her heart. She was ready for every word and breath to sound like the first raindrops after a drought: precious, unique, invaluable.

But it had been too late to listen. *The Bastards’* wish had come true: Dana’s mother was only there in body, her mind long gone.

Aunt Sara’s repeated stories of the Holocaust and the flagrant anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe had filled Dana’s adolescent ears until there was no longer any space to hear. So she’d emptied out everything, the good and the bad.

By twenty-two, Dana no longer wanted to have anything to do with Judaism. Judaism was nothing more than an albatross weighing a person down in a world that welcomed Wonder bread and BLTs. She had a nose job, got her hair perma-

nently straightened, and bleached her arm hair—prerequisites to making the biggest mistake of her adult life.

Now Dana was slicing the grapes for the *tsimes* and felt a sharp sting. A fresh circle of blood emerged on her thumb. “I will not make the same mistake with my children,” she thought as she sucked at the raw wound.

The back door opened and the familiar firm clip-clop of Harvey’s dress shoes against the dining room floor stirred Dana as if from a deep trance.

“Hey there, beautiful,” Harvey said and stared at his wife long enough for Dana to know that he was seeing much more than a woman preparing Shabbat dinner. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just cut my finger.” She smiled: a false, stiff expression that made Dana think of sad clowns with larger-than-life grins. “Guess what? Rachel’s wearing nail polish tonight.” She bent down to recheck the brisket in the oven because it kept her heart away from her mind, because it made it easier to look away from her husband’s eyes.

“Ah, is that why you’re crying?” Harvey touched her arm—a gentle gesture that jolted Dana back to reality.

The reality was that the Steins were less than an hour away. “I—why, well, I guess I was a little upset.” Dana touched her damp cheeks, unaware that she had been oblivious to much more than mashing potatoes and slicing grapes.

“Dana, it’s perfectly normal for Rachel to want to wear that kind of thing.” He offered Dana a paper towel for her face. “Especially when she has such a crush on Danny,” Harvey added in a whisper.

“No, of course, it’s not about that...”. She could still hear her daughters’ doors shutting her out. “It’s just that Bethany is so different, so charged up since Oswego.”

“Well, I think that’s normal too. Young love will do that to anyone.” He took a bite of the *tsimes* and loosened his tie. “Terrific, as always,” he added before walking out of the kitchen.

“Harvey? What *love*? What are you talking about?” She could hear herself whisper loud enough for her daughters to hear, but she no longer cared.

A look of pity flickered across Harvey’s face, an expression that said, “It’s really sad if you don’t already know this.” “Bethany and Ivan. Ivan, her college boyfriend—I’m sure she told you.”

“Our oldest daughter dating a *gentile*—no, I think I would have remembered that one, Harvey.” She turned on her heel to the kitchen.

Dana slammed the challah into the oven and hoisted the potted brisket onto the kitchen counter like a plate of flapjacks. If Dana were honest with herself, the real fear did not begin with Bethany’s return home. It started with the I’m-too-busy-to-talk phone calls from a dismissive and giggly nineteen-year-old; it started with the I’ll-be-home-late-so-don’t-wait-up-for-me warnings; it started with the impersonal forwarded e-mails which quickly replaced meaningful words from Bethany. And now, Dana could see that all of her niggling suspicions and fears stemmed from one

gentile boy named Ivan.

Harvey followed his wife back into the kitchen. "Look, there's no reason to get upset here, Dana. It's not like they're getting married." The words fell on Dana like nails.

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" She flung the freezer door open and threw the ice cube trays onto the kitchen table.

For one heavy moment, there was only the sound of the refrigerator's hum.

"Why don't you just tell her already? The longer you keep it a secret, the bigger the explosion. You're making a much bigger deal of it than it is." He lifted her apron over her head. "Come on," he said and tugged at her hand.

"Now?! Are you crazy? She'll wind up eloping with, with—"

"Ivan. Ivan Hamrick. Boyfriend to Bethany Silver for a little over six months." He said each word as if he were reading a tax report, as if stating the facts without emotion would make them easier on the heart.

But Dana's heart wasn't pumping any easier. "Fine, let me get this over with." She walked down the hall to her daughter's bedroom and knocked. Harvey was right. She couldn't keep living with her secret. It was only breeding more silence and distance in her daughter. "Bethany, can you please come out? It's important."

Just then, the doorbell rang. The Steins had arrived.

"What?" Bethany asked, a Cosmo Magazine in her manicured hands.

Dana wanted to hug her daughter and divulge the truth that was eating away at her center. "Danny's here. Put something nice on. It's Shabbat."

Bethany rolled her eyes and looked at Harvey Silver. "Hey daddy," she said and gave her father a big hug.

"I'll just get that door," Dana choked out and walked past the bathroom fumes of nail polish and remover to begin a Shabbat she wished was already over.

The Steins of Great Neck were wealthy the way Barbra Streisand could sing a little. They also happened to be best friends with the Silvers of Bellmore. It was Judi and Dana who had founded the relationship in college, long before David Stein invested in Google and Amazon, long before he came into Judi's financially "normal" life and shared his Daddy Warbuck's lifestyle with her in five-star matrimony.

Bethany didn't think that the Steins flaunted their money but that it oozed out, nonetheless. Judi Stein bought most of her clothing at Target, and David tended to grow excited about the latest Home Depot sale, but the new money leaked out into Judi's privately-charted jet and David's red Lamborghini. But for Bethany, the true dripping-with-glitz-gold Stein was Judi and David's son, Danny.

"It's the best iPod," Danny said and flashed the machine like one of the models on *The Price Is Right*. "You want to check it out?" He wiggled his thick eyebrows.

"No thanks," Bethany said and took a bite of her mother's brisket.

"You sure? I bet once you handle this baby you won't want to let go." Danny offered another wiggle of his dark brows.

"Danny, put it away. It's not appropriate for Shabbat," Judi said and smiled

apologetically to Dana.

"Oh please, Judi, it's fine." Dana waved a dismissive hand.

Bethany knew that if the iPod were hers, it would be immediately confiscated. But it wasn't hers. It was Danny Stein's: the Jewish Wonder Boy who made everything he touched as good as kosher.

"Could I see it, Danny?" Rachel asked. His eyes were two lit Sabbath candles.

"Sure," Danny shrugged, and Bethany heard a click.

"Gotcha!" Danny said and displayed a picture of Bethany with chunks of beef and carrots in her opened mouth.

"You better erase that," Bethany warned.

"Make me," Danny leaned across the table.

"All right. That's enough, Danny, put it—"

"Bethany, leave him alone. He's not—"

The phone rang: a slice of hope in Bethany's caged world.

Dana looked wearily at her husband. "Just let it go to voicemail," she said.

Bethany fixed her attention on Harvey and mustered all the desperation her eyes could hold. "Can we just ignore the rules for Shabbat this once?" she silently pleaded.

"I'll get it," Harvey said and winked at his oldest daughter.

Bethany watched as her mother cut the already tender brisket into ever smaller pieces. She knew that Dana's ears were straining to hear the mystery caller who had the *chutzpah* to interrupt her Shabbat dinner.

"Bethany, it's for you," Harvey announced with a mischievous smile.

"She'll speak to him later." Dana glanced at her dinner guests and added, "Anyone for more potatoes?"

"How do you know it's a *he*?" Bethany's jaw clenched.

"Because—a mother knows things." Dana smiled and thought of the fake wax figures at Madame Tussauds in the city.

"Then you should know that I wanted to speak to him," Bethany fumed.

"After Shabbat." Dana gave an exasperated smile to the Steins that said, "Isn't my daughter a silly girl?"

"Fine," Bethany mumbled.

There was a silence at the table punctuated only by the clinking of silverware.

"On second thought, go and use the phone, Bethany," Dana said. "Here, let me get that juice for you, Rachel."

"I can do it myself," Rachel replied.

"Of course," Dana agreed.

Bethany didn't know what to say to the reasonable woman who had taken over her mother's body. "It's Ivan. He's my boyfriend," Bethany gushed. Judi smiled politely, and David gave a non-committal murmur of approval. Danny, always ready to make fun, was busy snapping pictures of the food-engorged table.

“Ah...well, okay then, you better call him back.” Dana gave an enthusiastic nod. “So, who’s ready for dessert?”

It was Sunday afternoon and Ivan Hamrick would be at the Silvers’ home any minute. Bethany checked her body in the mirror for the tenth time that day. Ivan knew Bethany in sweatshirts and boxers, with morning breath and muffled ears. He knew about her love for buffalo wings and the fat hamster, Olive, in the psychology lab on campus.

So why did her lipstick need to match her dry-clean only mulberry sweater? Why was she wearing the pointy, black mules that always left her toes numb and throbbing?

“I miss you, baby,” Ivan had confessed in his serious baritone Friday night. “When can I take a ride to see you?”

Bethany insisted she take a trip to him, but it was her father who was against the idea. “I want to meet this young man first. Invite him over.”

It was her mother who got all excited about Ivan’s visit. “What kind of food does Ivan like?” Dana was the one who vacuumed the carpets and asked Harvey and Rachel to clean the bathroom. Stunned, Bethany offered to clean the kitchen.

Now there was a soft knock at Bethany’s bedroom door.

“May I come in?” Dana asked.

“Sure,” Bethany shrugged and opened the door.

“Oh, honey, you look beautiful.” Dana’s eyes were moist. “You must be so excited to see Ivan.”

Bethany stared at her mother long enough to make certain there was nothing but sincerity in Dana’s face. “It’s weird. I’m actually a little nervous to see him, I mean, it’s my boyfriend.” Her pulse raced just hearing the word *boyfriend*.

“Oh, I think that’s pretty normal. He’s been to your dorm before, but he’s never been to your home, right?” her mother asked.

The doorbell rang. Bethany imagined Ivan staring blankly at the front door, his eyes catching on the gold mezuzah posted just inches from his fair forehead. The thought made her feel uneasy—eager to check her floor-length mirror again.

“I don’t know,” she replied and walked past Dana.

But there was an unmistakable knot in Bethany’s stomach. Maybe, some part of her did know.

Bethany could feel that her mother was up to something. Here was blonde-haired, blue-eyed Ivan Hamrick sitting uncomfortably at the Silvers’ kitchen table, looking as Aryan as ever with a rosy sunburn on his fair cheeks and button nose. He was ripe for Dana Silver’s passive-aggressive comments, the ones meant to make every non-Jew feel small and “un-Chosen.”

“We have bagels and lox. Are you okay with that?” Dana asked Ivan.

“Mom, I don’t think Ivan knows what lox is.” Bethany gave Dana a look that said “You better behave” and smiled apologetically at her boyfriend.

"Of course I do. It's smoked salmon, right?" Ivan smiled at Bethany's mother. "And I'd love some, thanks."

"These days, you can't be American without knowing what lox is," Harvey quipped.

"That's what I had just assumed when—"

"You can't just make sweeping generalizations like that, Daddy. Ivan's German. Real German—from Germany," Bethany chimed in proudly.

Ivan's face turned a fiery pink. "Well, yes, by birth. But I do consider myself American more than anything."

"Do you go to a temple or a church?" Rachel asked and smothered raspberry jam on her bagel.

"Church—I actually went to church this morning. That's why I was a little late. I'm sorry." Ivan's pool blue eyes swam to each member of the Silver family.

"You should never apologize for practicing your faith," Harvey said.

"You're Catholic, aren't you?" Dana asked.

"Yes, how did you know?" Ivan asked and took a nervous bite of his lox and cream-cheesed bagel.

"I just—I had a feeling," Dana smiled and her cheeks flushed.

"Mom..." Bethany warned.

"What?" Dana asked.

"But *I* had a feeling you'd be Jewish," Rachel said with flecks of jam smattering the corners of her mouth.

Ivan gave a shaky laugh. "Why's that?"

"Because you look like a Ken doll—and Ken and Barbie are Jewish." She smile and licked the jam from her fingers.

"Oh...interesting." Ivan shifted in his seat.

"Some of the most beautiful churches are Catholic," Dana said and held up a glass pitcher, "Orange juice?"

"I've got it," Bethany grabbed the pitcher from her mother and shot her a look that screamed "Enough!"

"Thanks—yes, definitely. I—you've been inside churches then?" Ivan asked, surprise flooding his eyes.

"Please, my mother steps into churches like Muslim women wear bikinis," Bethany laughed. But she noticed, quite uncomfortably, that she was the only one.

"I used to attend St. Paul's for their Midnight Mass. The Priest offered encouraging words. I remember him always saying things I'd really needed to hear at the time and didn't even know it until he'd shared them. And the children's choir was always very moving," Dana explained to Ivan, but her eyes landed on Bethany and wouldn't look away.

"Wow! Do you mean St. Paul's on Broadway and—"

"I think we better go," Bethany said.

It was the way Bethany spoke which made Dana Silver jump, which offered no room for dissent.

Two hours later and Dana could still see the pure venom blazing from Bethany's eyes before Ivan and his battered Volkswagen peeled off to Westchester with her.

Harvey didn't understand his wife. Bethany didn't understand her mother. Dana didn't understand herself.

"It's reverse psychology. It's letting her know about the real me in an indirect manner," Dana had said, trying to convince herself.

Harvey had just sighed and went to take an equally confused Rachel over to her friend's house. Dana sat down on the couch, her hands squeezed against her face. When she closed her eyes, she was twenty-two again and there was her mistake walking right into her Aunt Sara's bakery. There he was writing down her phone number, there they were snuggling on a blanket in Central Park, there was her Aunt Sara shaking her worn face like a dark cloud on a perfectly sunny day.

But at twenty-two, Dana thought a person's insides transformed with a new outside. So she'd ignored her Aunt's admonishing looks and continued to straighten her naturally wavy hair until the frizz was gone, until she walked down an aisle festooned with implacable crosses and stained-glass scenes of the Virgin Mary and Christ with a genteel new nose on her smiling face.

Dana had married a Catholic. Life would be easier this way. No more struggles to assimilate, no more fighting as the underdog, no more stories of Jewish suffering. Dana O'Leary had arrived.

Hindsight always offered the sharpest vision.

Now Dana grabbed a Kleenex and rocked herself on the couch. She could see her former naïve self learning how to decorate a Christmas tree and how to roast pineapple ham. She could see herself learning how to ignore her insides, which churned every time she passed the picture of baby Jesus in their hallway and watched her new husband John genuflect at Mass.

No, Dana's insides never learned how to reflect her outside, American-as-apple-pie appearance. Her life with John felt like a sham. John sensed it, too, but both were too polite, too ashamed to admit their feelings.

So they'd stayed together—until *HaShem* forced them to sever. Only then did Dana understand; only then did she silently vow "Never again."

A red-eyed Dana stared out the window. Bethany wouldn't be home for hours.

But she *was* coming home! It wasn't too late. History did not have to repeat. Dana still had time to hit a nerve with her daughter.

She sat back on the couch and sighed. If only she could find the words.

Maria and Claus Hamrick lived in a small house with half an acre of backyard. Maria wore her hair in a tight bun, which seemed to pull back her already angular cheeks. It did not surprise Bethany that the woman wore a paisley dress with laced up black boots. Claus wore a t-shirt and overalls, which made Bethany feel like several goats should be grazing beside him.

"Papa will just get the carrots for the salad and then we can have supper,"

Maria said with a thick German accent. She was smiling at Bethany, but it didn't seem to reach the woman's eyes.

"Hey, papa, let me give you a hand with that," Ivan offered and gave Bethany an awkward grin as he walked out the back door after his father.

Bethany hugged herself. Mrs. Hamrick bent down to check on the smoky meat in her oven. The bun, the granny shoes, the thick accent—it all made Bethany think of the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*! Bethany couldn't get her head around the idea that the boy she loved was the son of a witch—a German witch—straight out of a Grimm's fairytale. "What was it with Germans and ovens anyway?" she thought and stifled a giggle.

"Are you alright, dear?" Mrs. Hamrick asked, her brow taut with concern.

Bethany flushed. How dare she consider such terrible things about Ivan's mother! This was, she was certain, nothing more than the narrow-minded influence of her own mother. All Dana's talk about churches was probably nothing more than a performance—one Bethany didn't buy for a second. "Can I help with anything?"

"You can get our drinks," Mrs. Hamrick suggested and held out a carton of whole milk.

"Sure." Bethany smiled and ignored the familiar unease in her stomach—the one that had begun the moment Ivan expressed a desire to see her at home. Milk with dinner? Ivan never drank milk with his meals on campus! Didn't this woman know her son?

Ivan returned from the garden with an armful of carrots and the smell of fresh cut grass. He watched her setting the glasses of milk down and gave a smile that reminded Bethany why she was there. "Here we go." He put the carrots in the sink. "Papa's picking some tomatoes too," he said and walked over to Bethany.

"No, no, we don't need any more tomatoes," Maria muttered and lifted up the kitchen window. "Claus, genügende tomaten!"

Claus yelled back something in German. All those guttural sounds, so similar to the Yiddish of Bethany's great Aunt Sara, yet somehow harsh, not soft and familiar like home. It didn't matter. All Bethany knew was the feel of Ivan's hands giving her tight shoulders a massage.

"Ivan, was du denken, tust du?" Mrs. Hamrick asked, her face a steamy red.

Ivan mumbled something in German and removed his hands from Bethany like hot poker.

"Claus, schnell!" Mrs. Hamrick smiled and put a steamy plate of meat on the table.

Bethany didn't know what "schnell" meant but couldn't hear it without thinking about the grandparents she never knew because of the Holocaust.

"Momma, I told you, Bethany doesn't eat pork," Ivan said in little more than a whisper.

A flash of heat came from deep inside Bethany. Her diet wasn't something that needed to be inconspicuously announced—like a disease people needed to tiptoe around!

“Oh, I thought you said no bacon. I didn’t realize that you kept kosher,” Mrs. Hamrick said, her eyes brimming with something Bethany couldn’t name.

“I don’t keep kosher. I just don’t mix meat with—”

“Claus, you’ll have to get more vegetables. Bethany doesn’t eat meat.”

“You a vegetarian?” Mr. Hamrick asked, a bucket of carrots in his sweaty arms.

“Momma, you never listen!” Ivan said.

“No, she’s a Jew.” Mrs. Hamrick announced the last word carefully, delicately—as if a bomb would detonate any minute.

But there were no explosions. Only the quiet ticking of the Hamricks’ Deutschland clock on their rooster-covered wallpaper.

Bethany waited for Ivan to say something, but Ivan looked too busy waiting for his father to say something.

Ivan’s father did finally break the tense silence, but it was only to fill it with empty talk about vegetables in the Hamricks’ garden.

It was only later, after the Hamricks bowed their heads and said Grace, after the Hamricks sipped their warm milk and cut into their baked ham, that Ivan decided to bring the conversation back to where it never really left.

“Bethany’s mom used to attend St. Paul’s on Broadway and Fulton. She used to attend Midnight Mass, right?” He glanced over at Bethany, but it was his mother and father his eyes were really focused on.

Bethany nodded and played with the enormous salad on her plate.

“I like that Seinfeld show. Momma and I watch the re-runs sometimes,” Claus said and smiled across the table at his wife.

Unfortunately for Ivan and Claus, Mrs. Hamrick didn’t smile back.

Ivan and Bethany made the congested trip back to Bellmore with the kind of talk reserved for strangers. All the words that always flowed between them seemed to have gotten stuck in the walls of campus life.

Ivan walked Bethany to her door. “I had a nice time.”

“Did you really?” Bethany asked and searched her best friend’s face.

Ivan stared past her. She could feel his eyes on the Silvers’ mezuzah. “It was... different, you know?”

“You never told me you spoke German.” Bethany played with the buttons on her sleeveless sweater.

“It never came up. Besides...you never told me that you do the whole Shabbat thing. I wouldn’t have called then and bothered you if—”

“It’s a holiday and I didn’t know you’d call then.”

“But you don’t do it at school,” Ivan replied.

“Well, you don’t speak German at school but you sound like one of the Gestapo in your parents’ house!”

“Are you calling me a Nazi?!” Ivan asked, his hand on his chest, his eyes fill-

ing like the first time he told Bethany that he loved her.

"Ivan, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. It's just...I didn't feel at home with you today." She sniffed.

"It was awkward, wasn't it?" he asked, a mixture of sadness and relief on his well-chiseled face. "I can't wait to get back to campus." He held her hands and kissed them.

"I better go," Bethany said, but she wasn't listening to her own words. She was too busy memorizing the moment: the touch of his lips against her skin, the weight of his hands in hers, the smell of fresh cut grass emanating from his warm skin—before she said goodbye.

Dana Silver had spent the day biting her nails raw, knitting her brows to find the perfect words to reach her eldest daughter. But when Ivan's Volkswagen drove away and left a sobbing Bethany in her bedroom, Dana could almost feel new gray hairs growing, and any attempt at wise words quickly left her frazzled brain.

Nothing could have prepared her for what happened next.

Dana opened Bethany's door an inch and waited to be firmly told to "Get out!" But it was Bethany who came running to her mother, a snot-filled nose on Dana's shoulder. "Oh mommy," she cried.

Dana felt like a deer in the woods. She was too shocked to move; too afraid that if she did, her daughter would run away and take all of that raw honesty with her.

So Dana just stood there and waited, listened. Yes, it was Dana's turn to listen.

"I love Ivan. And his parents seem great—even though his mother seems to think being Jewish makes me an alien from another planet," Bethany moaned against Dana's shoulder.

Dana bit her tongue until she could taste fresh blood—until the self-reprimand reminded Dana to listen, only listen.

"And they catered to me, as much as they could—not knowing any better, and you catered to Ivan. But there was just a...a different taste in Ivan's home. And he felt it here too. And it had nothing to do with our bagels and lox. It had nothing to do with their baked ham and warm milk. It was this feeling that Ivan and I were different, but not in a way that I felt good about. All this time, mommy, I thought you were the racist, but it's me. I think that Ivan is too." Fresh tears spilled out onto Dana's nightgown.

"I am her mommy. She is still my little girl, always."

Dana hugged her daughter all of her life force. She was on the precipice of everything that mattered, but there was no other way; she had to jump and tell her story, her truth.

There was John who gave her a different taste of life, who offered her love in exchange for a knotted stomach—until the car accident. He didn't survive. So it was a twenty-three-year-old Dana who needed to plan a Catholic funeral, who needed to organize the flowers and prayer cards, who needed to speak with the priest, and

choose an appropriate casket for the man she would never be buried beside. It was listening to the priest speak of pearly gates and Jesus and sinners and saints that made Dana realize how irreconcilable, how final, their differences.

How bright her eldest daughter was! All day Dana had labored over the perfect way to reach her daughter's heart, and in the end, it had been Bethany who spoke her own truth—long before any perilous trip down the aisle!

"Why didn't you tell me all of this before?" Bethany asked—her face blotted with tears and anger.

"Would you have listened?" Dana asked.

The answer hung somewhere in the silence between them—like the air humans take for granted until oxygen masks are needed.

Sheri Bernstein, Texas